

Seeing Mobility in a New Light

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With the further integration of the European Union came the right to move and reside in countries within the Union, regulations on mobility, as well as the mobility networks that make movement over greater distances possible. However, this fading of barriers to citizen's movement has come against pushback as a growing number attribute it to a sense of loss – be that of place, belonging, or of the self. To allay these fears, the authors of this piece make the case for contesting fixed notions of a place and reorganising mobility to foster meaningful connections.

Historically, the economic situation and political boundaries of the member states of the European Union tied most people to one place. Now, due to increased mobility by virtue of greater economic wealth and political freedom, people are less constrained. Mobility refers to the movement of passengers using road, rail, and aviation networks in the EU but also the change in life patterns that such connections enable. Since the 1990s, mobility in the EU has continued a steady rise as GDP increases. The number of people traveling within the EU, whether for work or holidays, has increased over the years and extended networks are expected to expand this growth. While the long-term effects of the pandemic remain unclear, aviation and public transport are projected to see the steepest rise in demand by 2030.

Although this increase in mobility has brought prosperity to many, the fading of economic and cultural boundaries has not been a welcomed change by all. A shift in mentality is exhibited by groups of people defining their “safe places” through nationalism and turning to tightly bound place identities. A sense of threat to these safe places causes spatial and social disruption, of which Brexit is the clearest example. Increased mobility has caused a strong fault line between the people who feel threatened and those who are prospering due to the fading of boundaries. Hence, solutions should be found for those who perceive their safe places to be at risk.

In his book *The Road to Somewhere*, David Goodhart sees two groups on opposite sides of the fault line in the British context. The “Somewheres”, as he describes, are those who have a strong feeling of tradition and feel attached to their hometowns. This group experiences ubiquitous mobility as overwhelming and long for an era where places supposedly occupied by coherent, homogeneous communities prevailed. Opposite to the Somewheres he positions the “Anywheres”. These are the people who are mobile, often live in cities, and manage change well. This group is assumed to be more aware of the values of distant places.

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David Goodhart is not the first to distinguish between people who attach to a single place and the ones who are mobile. Similar dichotomies can be found elsewhere: the sedentary versus the nomadic way of life; insiders versus outsiders; routes versus roots, or place as being versus place as becoming. However described, the growth of this schism is foundational to the decline of the centre and centre-left and the rise of populism across Europe. Besides their political implications, an intriguing aspect of these dichotomies is what they suggest about how places are perceived: many see them as static and safe as a consequence. However, places are created through multiple connections and can therefore never be static. Moreover, outside influence does not need to be seen as upending the safety of a place. Mobility can facilitate embracing this change as well as creating strong connections.

Although some might long for an era of supposedly homogenous communities (if they ever existed), it would be impossible to return to those times. Rather than constructing uniqueness based on internalised history within closed boundaries, we need to understand that, in fact, places are created via penetrable networks of relations. A place is never a fixed or finished entity – it is always evolving with our expanding social networks, stories, and reflections about other places. It is perhaps the overwhelming increase in information flow through this network and the incapacity to take it all in that make many yearn for supposedly static places. Spurring this increase is the freedom of movement which has only accelerated due to further economic and political integration of the European Union.

Free movement in Europe

Regulations on movement established in medieval times effectively put wanderers under the dominion of parishes. In the 18th century, people began traveling over greater distances in greater numbers. The responsibility for regulations changed from local to national administrations as the first passports were issued.

While wandering vagabonds in medieval times were branded by their parish, now people had to provide a booklet with personal information. Mobility became a topic of friction as nation states strengthened their legislative boundaries and regulations, limiting the movement of people without a passport. By 1914, the beginning of the Second World War, everyone carried a passport.

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A few years after the Second World War, maps of the continent were rolled out by the Economic Commission for Europe in Geneva. Delegates of this commission drew new lines and connections on the geographical landscape. They were convinced that there was only

one way to overcome the catastrophe of the war: common accessibility through a shared infrastructure system. Thereafter, regulating mobility changed from a national to a transnational concern.

In search of place

The acceleration of the freedom of movement changed how people's relationship with places are conceptualised. It sparked, for example, the dichotomy David Goodhart observes. People in one group, akin to the Somewheres, see widely accessible mobility as breaching the stable condition of their neighbourhoods, towns and cities, or as a loss of "sense of place". A person develops a sense of place through the memories, stories, and meaning they attribute to it. Safeguarding this connection to a place is of great importance for our sense of rootedness, self, and belonging. If you feel secure enough to establish connections to a place, it means that you are able to grow roots. In 1952, the renowned French philosopher Simone Weil argued that being able to grow roots is the most important and least recognised need of the human soul.

The fears of Somewheres are wonderfully described in the famous book *100 Years of Solitude* by Gabriel García Márquez. The citizens of the fictional village Macondo believe that they are living in solitude. Although they search for other lands, they find water wherever they looked. After a period of isolation, the spell of the island breaks when a new road links the village to other parts of the country. National politics interrupt the peace, and 32 civil wars are fought. Not long after everything settles is a railway constructed. Then comes a large global company with their own employees. The peace of the village is disrupted yet again. When reading this part of the story you feel empathy for the hatred towards the other, however this is not where the story ends.

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with other places.*

Contesting this sense of loss that Somewheres attribute to mobility is challenging. The difficulty emerges from the intangible nature of mobility and the limited research attention directed to understanding sense of place in relation to larger geographical areas like the EU. But what needs to be understood is that places are defined by virtue of their relation with other places and a considerable portion of our roots are constructed through these comparisons. Returning to the last pages of Gabriel García Márquez's book, the citizens of Macondo are fed up with the new developments and organise protests. After horrendous events, the village returns to isolation. The book ends with the famous quote: "races condemned to one hundred years of solitude did not have a second opportunity on earth." This quote highlights that without movement, or outside influence, a place ceases to exist. Constructing a sense of a place requires mobility and may actually be enhanced by it.

Reinventing a sense of place

What is clear is that mobility has become a fundamental facet of our society and influences our sense of place to a great extent. So, instead of fixating on the differences between Anywheres and Somewheres, we should find common ground to overcome the critical

dualism separating the two camps. The crux of the matter might lie in how mobility is developed and unfolded within and between places to strengthen bonds between here and there.

A noteworthy example of how mobility can consciously be used to establish a sense of place that goes far beyond the local setting is the Highway of Brotherhood and Unity, a project initiated by the government of the former Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. The goal was to connect a third of the inhabitants of the area, stimulate economic growth, encourage domestic tourism, and bring about much-needed national unity. The 1100-kilometre infrastructure project opened in 1963 and linked the cities of Ljubljana, Zagreb, Belgrade, and Skopje. It was constructed by volunteers, bringing together people with different ethnic and social backgrounds in symbolic unity and forming new ideals. The consequences of the new road were beyond expectations as it not only broadened the traveller's view but also cultivated a sense of place that covered a larger geographical area.

Sadly, the symbolism of the highway soured when the war Yugoslavia began in 1991. Instead of being the carrier of unity, the highway became the carrier of military goods and soldiers. Divisions were established through roadblocks which became concrete borders at the end of the war. After the collapse of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia there was little incentive to establish connections between the divided nations. The capitals of these newly established countries became laboratories for reinventing their sense of place. When tensions in the region reduced, and with pressure from other European countries, the highway is once again taking on its role to make connections in this region.

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The construction of the road network in the EU has been valuable to the European project. Roads were an important step towards creating a peaceful and prosperous continent by stimulating trade. Since 1950, the highways crossing the Union have been organised in a numbering system. In addition, all states agreed upon coherent road signs. Over the years the European network system grew enormously and traveling the continent has become uncomplicated. Yet few travelers realise the gargantuan effort that has been undertaken, and perhaps even less the impact on broadening a European's sense of place. For many, the intensification of mobility networks across the EU has resulted in a division between Somewheres and Anywheres.

Today, the EU is also coordinating the development of an international high-speed rail network. Slowly but surely the technical and environmental difficulties are dissolving, and an increasing number of tracks can be used by passenger trains, bringing cities and countries closer. The benefit of such a network, besides allowing fast and comfortable travel, is that it can provide socio-economic support to regions that were previously not connected to transnational networks.

Since the pandemic, it has become evident that the closing of cross-border networks leads to major inconveniences and political disputes, highlighting the importance of well-

functioning, shared infrastructure networks. While developing cross-national infrastructure networks, we have missed the opportunity to strengthen our sense of place by reaching through scales. A new paradigm for mobility should be developed where today's Somewheres realise they are living in a place that is larger, that they consider equally or even more safe, and where they can confidently put down their roots.

The Covid-19 pandemic has constrained travel while lockdown measures have introduced the possibility of combining work and a change of scenery. This development is an opportunity to replace volatility in mobility with slower, more sustainable, and ethical alternatives. We can reorganise mobility to be more suited for longer stay and connection with local scales, whether the reason for mobility is work or leisure.

A new approach to mobility should not only focus on fast movement and volume but also create awareness of the lands we travel through. It should make room for artists or designers to work on infrastructure networks with local communities or to find new ways of bringing stories to life, digitally or physical. Additionally, Europe needs to invest in our roads and train networks as well as waterways which have been vital to its development of European cities. With this new paradigm, an awareness of the diverse landscapes, rich culture and history of Europe can be generated.



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